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SCIENCE NEWS of the week

Remote Censoring: DOD Blocks Symposium Papers

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The federal government moved swiftly and dramatically last week to block the presentation of about 100 unclassified scientific papers at an international symposium on optical engineering in San Diego. The Department of Defense requested that the papers be withdrawn for security reasons, DOD officials said, primarily because scientists from the Soviet Union were present at the meeting. Most of the U.S. scientists and engineers affected did not learn their presentations had been canceled until they arrived at the conference. At the same time, the Department of Commerce sent an early morning telegram Aug. 22—just hours before the start of the meeting—warning conference organizers that any presentation of "strategic" information might constitute a violation of the Commerce Department's regulations covering the export of technology. Scientists from 30 countries attended the conference, the 26th Annual International Technical Symposium of the Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers (SPIE).

The actions prompted widespread concern among those at the meeting about the future of international exchange of scientific information at similar conferences.

The government has in the past censored scientific papers through its normal classification process and other screening methods, and it has even evicted Eastern Bloc scientists from several "sensitive" meetings, a Defense Department official acknowledges. These latest actions, however, appear to be unprecedented in their timing, in the large number of papers removed and in the scope of the papers' content. Prior to the last-minute notifications, none of the papers—although all were under DOD contracts—had been deemed sensitive enough in the area of weapons development to have been classified.

Defense Department spokesman James Freeman told SCIENCE NEWS that "it was determined that most of the [withdrawn] papers were covered by the international traffic in arms regulations. And for those to be presented in an international forum which would include Soviet and Eastern European participants, [the papers] would require a munitions license approval before being presented. The information in

most of the papers would have been helpful in the design and development of equipment on the U.S. munitions list."

In addition, Freeman said, the action came late because many of the papers were not submitted to the Defense Department until two or three weeks before they were to be presented. He added that contractors were "not as careful as they should have been" in recognizing the sensitive nature of the contents.

However, a Defense Department official closely connected with the action confirmed that it represents a "step-up" in enforcement, resulting from a "growing sensitivity, on the part of the Central Intelligence Agency and others, toward the Soviet acquisition of Western technology." The official, who asked not to be identified by name, also said the incident "is really a result of the Reagan Administration[s]" attitude toward the release of scientific information to the Soviets. But a spokesman for George A. Keyworth II, President Reagan's science adviser, said Keyworth "hadn't heard anything about" the events in San Diego.

Joseph Yaver, executive director of SPIE, said he was surprised at the number of papers involved and the swiftness of the government's measures. "A significant number of U.S. government-sponsored papers were withdrawn on very short notice," Yaver said in a telephone interview from SPIE's headquarters in Bellingham, Wash., "on the basis that the required clearance procedures had not been fully completed by the authors and that it was not in the national interest to allow the papers to be presented under these circumstances." Yaver said the situation was "totally beyond the control of the society. SPIE regrets that many of those in attendance were unable to obtain the information which might otherwise have been available." He added that SPIE will work with the government to "assure that a similar situation need not occur again."

Along with DOD's action, the Commerce Department's telegram had a chilling effect on conference participants. Although the telegram was seen by many of the attending scientists as a form of intimidation, a Commerce Department spokesman said it was simply a reminder to adhere to

the department's regulations governing technology export. "Saturday night [Aug. 21] at midnight, the people [in Commerce] who sent the telegram out told me—which is what we normally do with this sort of thing—simply that the telegram was alerting them [conference organizers] to the fact that they should refer to the regulations and make sure they comply with them," said Henry Mitman of the Commerce Department's Office of Export Administration and International Trade.

While the Commerce and Defense departments' actions were not related officially, they both seem aimed at research into optics, particularly involving infrared light and microelectronics research. Even though many projects in these areas do not apply directly to weapons development right now, the Defense Department is concerned about "the potential applications to systems that are maybe three, five

years down the road, maybe longer," said the DOD official. "People are starting to think, 'What could be of help in the weapons system development by a potential enemy—namely the Soviet Union?'"

SCIENCE NEWS has learned that one of the papers withdrawn from the symposium dealt with small, deformable mirrors, which would be used in creating large (3- to 5-meter) mirrors to beam a laser to a satellite and then down to submerged submarines. "You don't have a bunch of dummies that the Soviets send over to these technical meetings," said one of several Defense Department officials who reviewed the paper. "Why give... I won't say aid and comfort to the enemy... but why help them out?"

The apparent escalation of the government's science-related security measures follows repeated warnings by former Deputy Director of the CIA Admiral Bobby R. Inman and others of the potential dangers in giving the Soviets access to U.S. technical and scientific research (SN: 4/3/82, p. 229; 1/16/82, p. 35). And this is not the first time the government has taken security measures involving SPIE. Several months ago, U.S. Customs held up a Japan-bound shipment of books containing the proceedings of a previous SPIE symposium.

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